

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.4—Venezuelan Revolution

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

The revolution in Venezuela was one of several in South and Middle America that led to the emergence of independent republics. Under Spanish rule, a planter elite, called *hacendados*, dominated Venezuela. Among the elite, those born in Spain were known as *peninsulares* (from the Iberian Peninsula) and those native to America as *criollos* ([creoles](#)). The *hacendados* achieved their preeminence primarily through cocoa and coffee production, which was, before the revolution, brought to the Atlantic market through the Spanish mercantilist system. Politically, Spain ruled Venezuela as a colony, though town councils, most importantly that of Caracas, the future capital of independent Venezuela, allowed the *hacendados* a measure of political influence over local affairs. The bulk of the *criollo* population was less well off than the *hacendados*. They worked primarily in urban positions as artisans, soldiers, and small-to-middling traders. The majority of the population was of combined Native American and European ancestry, known in Spanish as [mestizos](#). This population was mainly made up of peasants. Though *mestizos* wanted to end the *criollos*' white privilege, they did not necessarily want to end slavery.

Two groups of people were outside the political system despite being very much a part of Venezuelan society. First, African slaves, whose labor was essential for the colony's plantation economy, constituted about 20 percent of the population. The foremost goal for slaves was freedom, specifically the end of slavery. As a minority of the population, however, and with the Venezuelan elite profiting from slave labor, slaves were not in a good position to force their demands. Second, the native population, suffering from the disease and death brought by Europeans in the sixteenth century and known as the [Great Dying](#), made up less than 10 percent of the total population at independence. The natives were thoroughly marginalized politically and economically.

CAUSES

By the nineteenth century, the economic interests of white Venezuelans and the Spanish imperial government had diverged. While Spain viewed its colonies as a steady source of income to be kept under control, the *hacendados* wanted the freedom to sell their cocoa and coffee on the open world market in order to fetch the highest price. Discontent with Spain was not limited to the upper classes. The Spanish colonial government sought, above all, to preserve Venezuela's hierarchical social order. Anyone who wanted greater social, political, or economic equality in the colony had, at some level, to oppose Spanish government.

Napoleon's 1808 conquest of Spain provided Venezuelan revolutionaries with a window of opportunity. In 1810, the town council of Caracas deposed the Spanish colonial governor and established a *junta*, or group dictatorship. Simón Bolívar, a wealthy *criollo* profoundly influenced by the European writers of the Enlightenment, traveled to Europe himself at this point to rally support for the revolution. Though he was largely unsuccessful, he did bring back with him Francisco de Miranda, an important Venezuelan dissident who had been in exile in England.

Upon Bolívar and Miranda's return, the *junta* passed the most radical legislation the revolution witnessed. Restrictions on trade were lifted, which pleased the *hacendado* elite. The abolition of taxes on food, of Indian tribute payments to the government, and of slavery itself satisfied the different egalitarian goals of the other Venezuelan groups.

RESULTS

The revolution's gains, however were rolled back when Spain briefly reconquered Venezuela after Napoleon's fall in 1814. Slavery was restored, and when Bolívar, having successfully elicited aid from independent Haiti, permanently liberated Venezuela in 1819, it remained intact. Venezuela continued to be ruled, as it had in 1810, by *hacendados*. White privilege, too, remained the order of the day, *criollos* reserving a greater measure of political and economic status than *mestizos*. The revolution did, however, end Spain's mercantilist restrictions on Venezuelan commerce, and the new republic traded its cocoa and coffee on the open world market.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What groups of people lived in Venezuela before the revolution?
2. What were the first reforms of Bolívar and Miranda?
3. How did different groups of people in Venezuela understand the Enlightenment ideas of liberty and equality?
4. What did the Venezuelan revolution accomplish?
5. In what ways did the Venezuelan revolution produce freedom? What were the limits of this freedom?
6. In what ways did the Venezuelan revolution produce equality? What were the limits of this equality?